

# Berks Countian is Santa Claus of the Tree industry

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**MOHNTON** - Christmas trees are usually a once a year thought to most people, but that's not true for John Freehafer.

Freehafer is the manager of Sheerlund Forest Tree Farm, here. The farm, which occupies several hundred acres of land, was originally the Horst Estate. Freehafer has worked on the farm, now owned by Robert Sullivan, for the past 30 years.

The busiest time on the farm is the few weeks before Christmas, but, according to Freehafer, some people come out in September to tag trees to be cut for Christmas.

The farm offers its customers two methods of tree selection, he said. First there is a wide selection of pre-cut trees, ranging from pines to Douglas Firs and then there is the method in which the customer goes out into the fields and selects his own tree; cuts it down, pays for it by height and then takes it home. The latter method of selection, ac-

ording to Freehafer, is becoming more popular. Its popularity may be due to the fact that the customer feels he is getting a fresher tree because he cuts it himself.

The most popular type of tree is the Douglas Fir, Freehafer said. "Pine isn't as popular anymore because of problems with fungus and other tree infections that have cropped up in that type of tree over the years," he said.

Even though the Douglas Fir has gained popularity among the public there have been problems in growing the trees in this area, Freehafer said. The Douglas Fir needs dry, well drained soil. The rainfalls in this area have increased in the past few years, which has decreased the growing capabilities of the Douglas Fir. The best area for growing the Species according to Freehafer, is in the Western states.

There are however some problems with growing Christmas trees. In the summer the grass must be cut between the rows of trees and pesticides and weed

killers must be used. The latter must be used with moderation, according to Freehafer, in order to avoid damage to the trees. But, unlike most other farm products, Christmas trees aren't an instant cash crop. It takes ten or fifteen years for a tree to grow enough to be sold at Christmas time.

Then there's the problem with soil and crop rotation. As an alternate crop, Freehafer has planted some shade trees, but he says that there's not much else that will grow in the soil after it has been used for growing Christmas trees. "Years ago Christmas tree growers would buy a small plot of land, grow trees for a few years until the soil became depleted and then move on to another plot of land. But, that just can't be done anymore," he said.

And then there's the problem with trying to find workers who don't mind working outside all year round for relatively low pay and few benefits. "There just aren't too many people around who can fit that bill," Freehafer remarked.



Tom Rissler (left) helps manager John Freehafer bale trees at the Sheerlund Forest tree farm.

But, there is an area for indoor work at the farm and that's in the ornament shop. The shop, located in a small building on the farm property, has expanded in both size and inventory since it was first opened. Freehafer says the buyer for the shop tries to buy things that other stores don't carry.

"Nowadays everyone is in the ornament business. We were going to expand our shop over into a larger barn, but decided that it wouldn't be financially profitable," he noted. The ornament shop has a wide variety of tree lights and decorations for sale as well as a wide selection of wreaths and pine cone decorations.

In spite of all the problems and pitfalls of Christmas tree growing, Freehafer seems happy with his work. Because of his attitude towards trees and especially towards Christmas trees, he might be regarded as the Santa Claus of the Christmas tree business.



Rows of trees line the hillsides and acres of the farm with customers

wandering through the stands to choose their evergreen.


## Horse barn plans available free

If you own horses and are thinking of building a new barn for them, you may want to look into the free plan service offered by the Delaware Cooperative Extension Service. There are a number of good designs to choose from, says extension agricultural engineer, Ernest W. Walpole. The plans were prepared by the U.S. Department of Agriculture

and include everything from a 10' x 12' portable barn to a 60 foot riding arena. A popular plan for many years has been one for a 22' x 34' two stall barn with tack and feed rooms. The plan (No. 5838) calls for a good-sized covered area suitable for grooming, blacksmithing and general work around horses, double dutch doors, roomy box stalls and a poured concrete foundation.

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